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A STRANGE MEETING AND HAMSDUN'S MYSTERIES

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In the middle of the summer of 1891 a little Norwegian coast town was the scene of a series of most unusual events. A stranger turned up in the town, a certain Nagel, a noteworthy and original charlatan, who did a heap of odd things and vanished again as suddenly as he had come. This man had even a visit from a young and mysterious lady, who came on God knows what business and only ventured to stay a couple of hours in the place. But all this is not the beginning—*Mysteries* (Knopf, New York, 1927), 7.

Like Hamsun's first novel, *Hunger*, his second novel, *Mysteries*, has a kind of prologue in which the reader is introduced to the main character and the scene of his adventures. In *Hunger* the protagonist was a first-person character, and the scene was Kristiania. In *Mysteries*, the hero is called Nagel, and the setting for his activities is a little Norwegian coast town. What is particularly interesting in the "prologue" of *Mysteries* is the inclusion of a second character, "a young and mysterious lady who came on God knows what business." Readers have a right to assume she will turn out to be the center of some exciting and important series of events later in the book, but they are mistaken. Admittedly, the lady does turn up again halfway through the book; the whole of chapter XII is devoted to her sudden two-hour visit, but this visit is purely incidental to the story. Indeed, after reading the chapter we are as ignorant of the lady as are the townsmen, and will agree with them that only God knows on what business she came. Of course, her visit adds a little to our knowledge of Nagel; the fact that he is in no way an agriculturist; that he has been known, at least to the lady, by the much more prosaic name of Simonsen; and that he has had some sort of affair with this penniless woman, whose language is Danish rather than Norwegian. All this, however, hardly justifies her presence in the prologue.

At this point it will prove useful to remember the manner in which *Mysteries* came to be written. Hamsun, who gradually came to think less highly of this novel, excused its shortcomings by referring to the difficult conditions under which it was composed "i Sarpsborg, i København, under Flytninger, under Forelskelser, under Fattigdom—

derav det usammenhængende i Scenerne.”¹ It seems that during Hamsun's work with *Mysterier* immediate impressions of people and events found their way more easily and more directly into the manuscript than was later the case with this extremely critical artist. But that also means that *Mysterier* is more autobiographical than Hamsun's later books. Most of the novel was probably written during and after Hamsun's well-known lecture tour of 1891 in the larger cities of West and East Norway, but it looks as though the first plans for the book were made in the little coastal town of Lillesand. Hamsun stayed here for several months before starting his travels and lectures, and it therefore seems a likely place to search for answers to some of the puzzles in the book.

After the publication of *Hunger* in 1890 Hamsun looked for a small quiet place to start writing his next book. By July 10 he had settled in Lillesand. He describes the place in a letter of August second to his friend, Erik Frydenlund:

Lever her et elendigt Skidtliv. En jammerlig By, og her er ikke et Menneske i den . . . Jeg skulde ogsaa holdt et Foredrag her, men de unge Damer paa Stedet har gjort Strejk; de vil intet have med "Sults" Forf. at bestille. Og det fortænker jeg dem ikke i. Jeg giver dem forresten den argeste Fan allesammen . . .

Det blir ikke noget af Novellesamlingen til Jul. Jeg skal skrive en stor Roman til Vaaren. Og det skal du simpelthen gaa ned til Anne og faa dig en half Øl paa.”²

The remark about the big novel for spring publication is one of the earliest references to *Mysterier*; it seems that by the end of July, 1890, Hamsun had some idea of what his next novel was going to be. Roughly at the same time he wrote the famous program article "Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv" in which he speaks about his stay in Lillesand and his almost daily visits to Vestre Moland church. These visits bring to mind the visits of Nagel to Dagny's home at the rectory which lay within a pleasant walking distance from the town. Lillesand had got its own church only the year before Hamsun's stay there, but the minister, the Rev. Karl Martin Kobro, still lived at the vicarage in Vestre Moland, somewhat less than a mile north of the town. Here is at least an indi-

¹ Tore Hamsun, *Knut Hamsun* (Gyldendal, Oslo, 1959), 119.

² Cf. letter to Erik Frydenlund dated Aug. 2, 1890. Quoted in my article "Knut Hamsuns brevveksling med Erik Frydenlund," *Edda* (1959), 240.

cation that Lillesand may be the setting also of *Mysteries*, and further research will show how a number of names and incidents from the little town correspond to details in the novel.³ That the bailiff's name really was Olsen probably proves nothing;⁴ on the other hand, a name like Karlsen seems less coincidental. Carlsen was one of the high-school teachers Hamsun met during his stay in the town.⁵ Admittedly, he was not a theologian, nor did he commit suicide; but Lillesand was shaken up by a suicide that summer when a young man killed himself after a short unhappy marriage, according to Mrs. Berbmom.⁶

Another, somewhat less common, name is that of Stenersen, the liberal doctor in *Mysteries*. It appears to be a well-known name in Lillesand history. Steener Steenersen was an enterprising merchant and shipowner who had died suddenly in Leghorn, Italy, in 1828, but whose body was taken home on one of his own ships and buried in Lillesand soil. His wife Severine headed the business during the following generation, and when she died (1867) was buried beside her husband. Hamsun must have been struck by the inscriptions on their gravestone in Vestre Moland churchyard.

Then there is the strange character from *Mysteries* known as Minutten. We are told that his true name was Johannes Grøgård, and that he was the son of a minister and a relative of the Grøgård known from Eidsvoll. This Minutten is a real person. His name was Hans

³ My information about Lillesand comes from C. Hansen, *Lillesands sparebank gjennom hundre år* (Lillesand, 1952); and from my correspondence with Mrs. Nora Esmark Berbmom, b. 1873, who lived in Lillesand during Hamsun's stay there. Mrs. Esmark Berbmom had already told me in her letters most of what she knew of Old Lillesand when I had the opportunity to visit her in Lillehammer in 1958. I then gave her a copy of *Mysteries*, which, she claimed, she had not read before.

⁴ The *old* bailiff, L. V. Olsen. He was succeeded in 1884 by M. Gundersen.

⁵ Henrik Carlsen, science teacher at the high school, 1878-1896; another teacher, possibly Hans Kristian Nordvik (1887-1893) is mentioned in the letter to Erik Frydenlund quoted above: ". . . En Stakkars Djævel af en Seminarist (Lærer her ved Middelskolen) har ovenikøbet laant 100 Kr. af mig, forat komme hjem i Ferien til Bergens Stift, og disse Penge faar jeg altsaa ikke igen, hører jeg. . . ."

⁶ A suicide is also mentioned in "Smaaabyliv," published in *Bergens Tidende*, July 7, 1890 (later included in *Kratskog*). Hamsun writes of this story in the letter of Aug. 2 to Frydenlund: "Forøvrigt har jeg skældt ud Lillesanderne paa en indirekte Maade i en Artikel, som jeg har sendt til "Bergens Tidende," og som du burde læse. Jeg tror, den er bra. . . ."

Jakob Grøggård like his grandfather, a minister who was also one of the Eidsvoll representatives. Hans Jakob's father, Johannes Grøggård, had been one of the great businessmen in Lillesand around the middle of the century, but at his death in 1875 his property was considerably reduced. Hans Jakob, though musically gifted, was mentally retarded. He stayed with a younger brother who had taken over what little was left of his father's business.⁷ There are many local stories about Hans Jakob's strange behavior on various occasions, but he was not quite the miserable buffoon Hamsun had in mind with Minutten: here, as elsewhere, several models have been used to make up one literary personality. For instance, the ingenious implication of something grossly immoral in Grøggård may well have been taken from local "bums" like "Drille-Petter" and "Masseguden"; the last one was said to have developed a liking for little girls.⁸ On the whole it seems as though Hans Jakob Grøggård enjoyed general respect, actually the way it is expressed by the landlord in *Mysterier*: "That's the man we call Minutten. He is not quite right in his head, but I'm sorry for him. He's an excellent fellow. . . ." And Mrs. Esmark Berbm writes in similar fashion ". . . Hamsun har . . . efter min og andres mening chikanert flere bra borgere, f. eks. Grøggård"; and, in another place, "Grøggård av en ansett familie og pianist, havde K. H. bare ikke fornedret ham til en så å si klovn." Letters⁹ show how lonesome and miserable Hamsun often felt in this small coast town which he sometimes facetiously refers to as "Fillesand." As was mentioned above, he intended to try out his lectures here, but apparently the local ladies whom he had to rely upon for an audience, would have nothing to do with the author of *Hunger*. Mrs. Esmark Berbm blames it less on *Hunger* than on Hamsun's too cordial friendship with certain more mature women. She writes: "På grund av hans damebekjendtskap fandt vi ham upasende selskap." Apparently this lady was a seamstress; then there was

⁷ Mrs. Esmark Berbm writes: "Hans Jakob må ha vært ham som blev kaldt Minutten. Han var mest alene, *fort* tilbens. Hans sorte hansker stod langt utenfor fingrene for å spare på tuppene. Bodde hos Jomfru Gulbrd. Hamsun bodde der en tid senere på Norge. Hans Jakob blev ikke kaldt Minutten i min tid."

⁸ Hans Jakob is probably also the model for Tønnes Olai in "Smaabyliv," and hence more indirectly for Oliver in *Women at the Pump*.

⁹ E.g., to Frydenlund and Erik Skram (*Knut Hamsun som har var*, Gylden-dal, Oslo, 1956, 101).

“Kristine på Kaffebua”: both of them may have served as models for Martha Gude in *Mysteries*. But Hamsun must have had some success with the younger women also. In a letter to a friend in Bergen he writes:

. . . om jeg kan rive mig løs fra min Forelskelse her? Kære, snille, venlige Frue, De skal ikke le af mig for dette. Jeg er virkelig saa glad i hende; men det var ikke mig, som begyndte, jeg forstår ikke, hvorledes det begyndte, det var kanske mig alligevel, men det ved jeg ikke. Gud bevare Dem hvilke Øjne! Hun spiller saa godt og har slikt fint Gemyt og det klareste, klareste Hoved. Men det er altsaa saa galt altsammen!¹⁰

What girl he is referring to is difficult to know; it could well have been one of the Rev. Kobro's seven daughters. The fourth one in particular was very beautiful. Her name, like that of the heroine in *Mysteries*, was Dagny (b. May 15, 1875). But there were other girls. Mrs. Esmark Berbom writes—and this was before she read *Mysteries*—that back in 1890 when she was a girl of seventeen, she had a thick flaxen plait and that when Hamsun once spoke to her, she ran away since he had not first introduced himself. Readers of *Mysteries* will recall this incident from the book and will remember that Dagny's most characteristic feature is her pigtail.

These then are some examples of evidence supporting the theory that Lillesand has provided not only the setting, but also a number of the characters and events in *Mysteries*, that in fact the book—at least in one of its aspects—is an account of Hamsun's stay here during the summer and fall of 1890. Mrs. Esmark Berbom, after reading *Mysteries*, could well write:

Jeg må si at *Mysterier* forbauset mig! trodde ikke det var anset for good taste å skrive om folk i levende live. Beskrivelsen av alt i byen, prestegårdens beliggenhet, personene osv. er jo ikke til å ta feil av.

After all this it does not seem unreasonable to expect to find also the mysterious lady of chapter XII somewhere in the Lillesand context. In a letter to Mrs. Larsen, Hamsun talks about a widow. This is what he writes:

. . . idag kom Gud hjelpe mig “Enken” med sit Billede,—som jeg lagde i et Lommetørklæde paa Bunden af en gul Lædervadsæk—.

¹⁰ Letters to Bolette Pavels Larsen, Oslo University Library.

Earlier in the letter, this widow is described in the following manner:

Enken? Nej, Enken var ikke styg. Hun rejste altsaa ja—"uden videre." Forresten ikke ganske uden videre, men—naa, det var ikke noget videre. Hvis hun vil oversætte mine Bøger bra og sende mig engelske Pund, saa er jeg saa glad i hende, at det er svært. Hvilket jeg vil svare hende.

It seems that Hamsun's interest in this widow was chiefly financial. Apparently the lady was English; yet she knew enough Norwegian to think of translating Hamsun's works. Of these, the first to be translated into English was *Hunger*. The translation appeared in 1899, and the translator was George Egerton, a pseudonym for a woman writer whose real name was Mary Chavelita Dunne.¹¹ She was born in Australia in the same year as Knut Hamsun, and her father was an Irish officer, who, after spending some of his younger years abroad, retired from army service and for the rest of his life scrounged on friends and relatives. The education of his family he left to its own devices. When his wife died, the little children were looked after by their oldest sister Chavelita until she went to Germany to attend school there. Later she worked as a nurse in a London hospital and for some time also tried to find suitable employment in New York. Among her father's curious friends was a Mr. Henry Higginson who had had odd jobs with the Customs, and with bankers, moneylenders, and fish merchants. He had become an Anglican monk, then a missionary, and was at the time a domestic chaplain to author Whyte Melville's widow whom he married after first obtaining a divorce from his American wife. Mrs. Whyte Melville then asked Captain Dunne to let his daughter travel with the newlyweds as their friend. This was arranged, but it was soon discovered that the young traveling companion carried on an affair with Mr. Higginson, who, though he had two wives living, had even proposed to Miss Dunne. They fled to Norway and settled at Langesund where they bought a home. Mr. Higginson was a heavy drinker, and in Norway his colorful life came to an end after only two years.¹² His wife, however, managed to learn Norwegian during that time and also

¹¹ Information about George Egerton from Laura Marholm Hansson, *Kvindernes bog* (Aschehoug, Kristiania, 1894); and T. de Vere White ed., *A Leaf from the Yellow Book* (The Richards Press, London, 1958).

¹² Presumably his last days are described in George Egerton's story "Under a Northern Sky," from *Keynotes* (Lane, London, 1893).

cultivated her intellectual interests. After Higginson's death in 1889, she inherited the house in Norway and for many years had income from it. In 1891, she married a Newfoundlander by the name of George Egerton Clairmonte, from whom she later took her pen name. They went to live in the countryside in Ireland until it became evident that he was another good-for-nothing sort of person. After sending him abroad, first to Africa and then to America, Chavelita finally divorced him. He died about this time, so that she was free in every way to marry a Norwegian admirer. However, the Norwegian turned out to be less interested than she had hoped, so instead she married an Englishman, a Mr. Reginald Golding Bright, who was fifteen years her junior. He remained a kind and faithful companion to her during the forty years of their marriage. She survived him, too.

During the 1890's several books by George Egerton had appeared. She had taken up writing while living with Mr. Clairmonte in Ireland—no doubt to eke out a living—and almost immediately became famous at home and abroad. She corresponded with prominent people like W. B. Yates and G. B. Shaw, Ellen Terry and Beerbom Tree; she even had some admirers of her female charm among them; one of them was Richard Le Gallienne, who had first discovered her; but it seems they soon tired of her. Alas, so did her readers. Like most of the literature from the Yellow Book circle in which she moved, George Egerton's writings are now period pieces only. If she had written a straightforward autobiography, as she sometimes had planned, it would probably have been her most lasting literary contribution. Hers was indeed a strange life, and among its strange incidents was, as she put it, the "meeting of the west wind with the rainbow." This meeting is recorded in her first book, *Keynotes*, a collection of stories of which one, with the title "Now Spring Has Come," tells of her rendezvous with a young Norwegian writer. Although no names are mentioned, there can be little doubt that this writer was Knut Hamsun.¹³

George Egerton first tells how, during a stay in Norway, she was

¹³ Cf. Hamsun in letter to Victor Nilsson, Jan. 23, 1894 (Oslo University Library): ". . . Der er udkommet en Bog in London og Boston som heder Keynotes by George Egerton. Bogen er tilegnet mig; kan ikke De læse den og anmælde den (Roberts Brothers, Boston). Jeg forstaar mig ikke nok paa Engelsk længer til at kunne give Forf. nogen Kritik."

waiting in a bookshop for some papers she had ordered. She picked up a book at random and began reading it, but was told by the book-seller: "This is a very bad book, Madam. One of the modern realistic school, a *tendenz roman*, I would not advise Madam to read it." But she did, and was consumed with a desire to see and know the author. She found out where he was; they began to correspond and finally agreed to meet at a little town on the coast. She arrived on a Sunday afternoon and asked for him at the hotel. She recalls:

The door opens, and I am satisfied. "In the space of a second's gaze I meet what my soul has been waiting for—ah, how long? I think always . . ." What was he like? Well, an American bison or a lion. You might put his head among the rarest and handsomest heads in the world. Prejudices in his favor? No, not a bit. His hands, for instance, are great laborer's hands, freckled, too; I don't like his gait either, indeed a dozen things. . . .

But she must have fallen instantly in love with him, and she must have believed that he also felt something for her. It made her happy when he called her a little girl, and when he admired her hands with the costly rings. They spent that Sunday evening together, but already next morning she left, and he was up to see her off. He asked her to write and to send him her portrait, and she promised to be back as soon as winter was over. George Egerton tells how, as the winter dragged on, she noticed a certain reserve in his letters. Then she went to see him a second time, probably in one of the larger cities on the south coast of Norway. She describes their two-hour meeting in the following manner:

Well, once again I was standing at a table in a hotel room waiting . . . I said again, "Come in." I held fast to the table with my left hand and smiled—to be accurate began a smile. Spring is later up there, perhaps some of the winter's frost was still in the atmosphere, for something froze it on my lips. I felt a curious stiffening in my face, and the touch of his hand did not thaw me. . . .

However, though she was at first numbed by the tragedy of the situation, she saw also its ludicrous side. Indeed, she saw herself as the old marriage-sick maid in Holberg's play, *The Restless One*. And *his* face brought to the mind the young suitor who, having asked Magelone's permission to pass his hand over her bosom, discovers that she is somewhat lacking in feminine forms. She writes:

When I came back in the flesh, he realized that I was a prosaic fact, with less charming hands, a tendency to leanness, and coming crow's feet. His look of dismayed awakening was simply delicious. [But she was willing to make allowances and goes on to say] He was a man passionately attached to his art. His art had been treated churlishly for months, for the sake of a dream. The dream was out, and he feared her revenge. That is one point of consolation for me. If one has made an idiot of one's self, it is at least self-consoling to have done so for a genius.

Back in England she began translating *Hunger*, and there can be little doubt that this work contributed to her own first conscious attempts as a creative writer. But when she bought her penny-exercise book and wrote the first of her six stories, she had probably also read *Mysteries*. *Keynotes* appeared a year after and bore the motto "To Knut Hamsun. In memory of a day when the west wind and the rainbow met 1892-93." Since their meetings took place in the fall of 1890 and the spring of 1891, perhaps the dates refer to the publication years of the two books and the two versions of the meeting contained in them. It is interesting to see how the two accounts compare. In the person Kamma Hamsun has given a good characterization of George Egerton's type; her concern about her looks and her health is typical. Even when she is most worked-up, she asks to be given the loan of his comb; and she talks a lot about her weak chest, she even has him pass his hand across her bosom to feel this weakness. The curiously changing mood of their conversation with scrutinizing cold looks following melancholy smiles over happy memories of the past, is excellently rendered in her nervous language and her sudden shifts from "De" to "du." Hamsun's story differs from George Egerton's in a number of ways. Essentially different is the motivation for Kamma's visit. In Hamsun's story she comes, not to renew her love, but to relieve her former lover of some of his money. If Hamsun had actually been able to lend George Egerton money, it would have been an attractive way out of an embarrassing love affair. But Hamsun's correspondence from Lillesand during the summer of 1890 shows clearly that he was hard up for money, and when George Egerton came to see him there, it was because she could afford the journey and he could not. Of the two versions, Hamsun's, then, looks almost like the reversal of truth; yet in another, symbolic, sense, it is probably the more correct. George Egerton had somewhat exaggerated ideas not only of her ability to charm men, but of her own eroticism. She believed she was in love; in fact, she was only looking

for the friendship of a genius. To a woman of her type such comradeship came nearer to self-realization than anything short of being an artist. She writes: "Did we not talk about anything? Of course we did, Tolstoy and his doctrine of celibacy. Ibsen's *Hedda*. Strindberg's view of the female animal. And we agreed that Friedrich Nietzsche [sic] appealed to us immensely." Hamsun, then, gave her a lot of attention; he also gave her *Hunger* to translate and with it an encouragement to write herself. Like Kamma, George Egerton did not go away empty-handed. There was no love to be had, but then really she had not come for it.

Even though Kamma in *Mysterier* is George Egerton, it hardly explains the reason why she is in the novel; that is, unless she can be fitted into some special formula for a novel like *Mysterier*. Again it is useful to remember how *Mysterier* came to be written. After Hamsun had completed *Hunger* he wrote to Frydenlund:

Altsaa faar jeg—nervøs og aldeles udarbejdet som jeg nu er—rejse hen til et Smaasted, grave mig ned der og atter give mig til at skrive. Der er ingen Raad med det; Bogen maa ud til Jul. Det skal være en Samling af underlige Noveletter.¹⁴ [Two months later he writes the passage quoted above] . . . Det blir ikke noget af Novellesamlingen til Jul. Jeg skal skrive en stor Roman til Vaaren."

It seems that the stay in Lillesand changed his plans. A series of events developed around his own person resulting in a literary plot with Dagny and Grøgård as chief supporting characters. All that now happened to the hero might be part of this plot, provided it was artistically justifiable. This creative process would consist of adapting casual events to some central idea. As to the short stories, most of which were probably not beyond the embryonic stage, a few may have appeared in later collections; others seem to have been fitted into the novel without difficulty. After all, Nagel is a gifted narrator, and some of his stories belong to the finest passages in *Mysterier*. Even Hamsun's lecture preparations have been put to good use in the well-known scenes where Nagel holds forth on literary and other subjects. On the other hand, there are parts that are difficult to place in the plot or to view as variations of a theme. They retain their nature of short stories also where their characters are identical with other characters in the book. Chapter XII, it seems to me, is a case in point. It shows that, like

¹⁴ "Knut Hamsun's brevveksling med Erik Frydenlund," *Edda*, 1959, 238.

George Egerton, Hamsun found their brief encounter in Lillesand an irresistible literary motif, even though using it in his new work led to what he calls "det usammenhængende i Scenerne."

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